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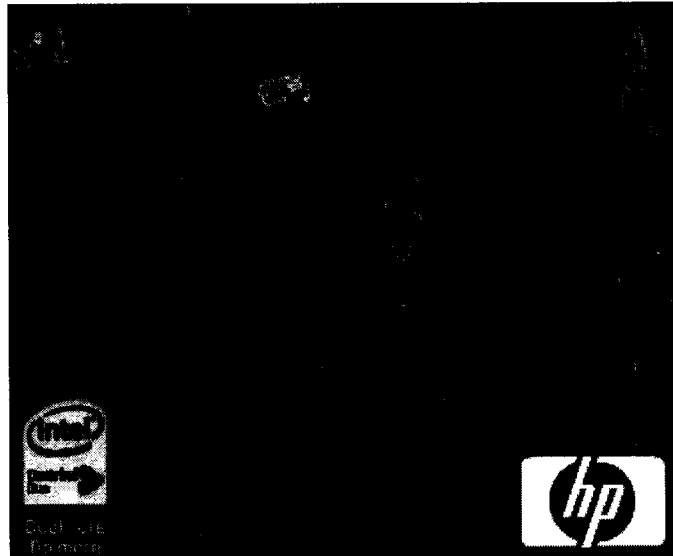
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$1 Billion Well Spent?
IBM, SCO, and the Rest of the Linux Arena

Robert McMillan
Thursday, April 24, 2003
01:18:36 PM

LP: Are your customers concerned about this SCO lawsuit?

Stallings: No, we haven't seen any evidence that customers are concerned about making a decision against IBM or counter to any proposal they have on the table from IBM. We talk to our customers on a regular basis. They know what's in the newspaper. I can't comment on the lawsuit itself, but the market certainly hasn't

slowed down, from what I can see, because of any lawsuit.

From a sales standpoint, we certainly haven't seen anything. As a matter of fact, customers--the ones that are reading and listening and understand it--they are more enthused by the opportunity. It has brought a lot of things to light. People are more educated, and an educated customer... we haven't seen anything in the marketplace that's negative.

LP: Do you think this will have any impact on the UnitedLinux effort? There has been speculation that this lawsuit might cause SCO and SuSE to split over the UnitedLinux (UL) effort. That could have an effect on IBM.

Stallings: The whole beauty of this Linux distribution strategy is that you have as few versions of it in the market as possible, so that you don't conflict your customer or confuse your customer, and they have to have all kinds of support strategies around multiple versions. That was the genesis of this idea of UnitedLinux. And they've got a construct at UnitedLinux so that distributors can join UL, or they can go out on their own. There is plenty of opportunity to support both of those.

The good news is that if any one of the distributors dropped out of UnitedLinux, it's still UL 1.0, or whatever version they're shipping at the time. So customer should feel good, that "I'm going to get this release from UL, and it's consistent, no matter who I get it from."

LP: Wouldn't it be easier, though, if there was some community-defined standard that was actually respected by the ISVs? Something like the Linux Standards Base.

Stallings: I think that's what's happening. UL and their partners and Red Hat talk all the time, and everybody galvanizes around the kernel. Now there's work going on in 2.5 to eventually get to 2.6, and that's the rallying point. I don't know who the company or group of companies would be to decide, "OK. This is a standard." The good news is the community forces a standard.

The downside of that is that it probably doesn't move as fast and it's probably not as clear as most people who cover the industry would like it, because it's so different from the proprietary method.

LP: But there is the Free Standards Group effort, which includes the Linux

Standards Base. They've been trying for years to make a distribution-neutral Linux standard, but the market seems so far ahead of the LSB that there has been a necessity to have standards like United Linux. It's always seemed to me that this is a place where IBM could play an important role in bringing the LSB standard to the point where it was meaningful to customers and ISVs. Then you wouldn't have to worry about UnitedLinux or Red Hat being the standard. I'm not sure, though, whether IBM really has the will to do that, or if you feel that this United Linux/Red Hat dual approach is good enough.

Stallings: I think it good enough. The great news is that they're all working together and we work with them. Again, this isn't something we could control. Even if your thought was something we wanted to take on, that would be out of character with the right way to participate in the community.

It may move slower than a lot of people want, but the good news is that when we get there, everybody's bought in. Everybody knows what's in the standard. And by the way, there's plenty of work to be done in the meantime with customers just adopting the current versions of Linux that are out there. We're all swamped with business and opportunities and customers. We've just got to let it evolve. And we think that's the best way to do it. That's our commitment to the industry. I think that surprised a lot of people, like maybe yourself and some others that have watched IBM over the years, but look how it's grown.

Just like everybody's reacted to this SCO suit--everybody's got an opinion, particularly in the open source community--I think if anybody tries to stake out a claim that my version is better than the other, the market will react to that. So we think it's best to let it evolve. Let the customer decide.

LP: What are IBM's major goals for Linux in the next few years?

Stallings: Well the biggest thing is applications. Working with the ISVs and partners and customers to get their applications onto Linux. It's a lot of work. We've got the servers enabled. The vendors in the market have got Linux to run, but the next wave of this is when we've got tens of thousands of applications--particularly for the small-to-medium-sized businesses that run on Linux, so that companies can make decisions quickly and get it implemented quickly and know that it works.

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Skip Ahead

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